

By Alex Holt and Hadas Gold, Times Staff Writers
St. Petersburg Times

WASHINGTON — When U.S. Rep. Alcee Hastings, D-Miramar, was a child, the girls at his Altamonte Springs elementary school would play in the grass while the boys would play cops and robbers. That is, except for the three boys who would play with the girls.

"In those days we would call them 'sissies,' " Hastings, 74, said in an interview. "I got into two fights with people calling them sissies."

Even then, Hastings could see they weren't being treated fairly and he did something about it.

"I won both those fights," he said.

These days, Hastings is fighting again, championing a repeal of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy that prevents service members from admitting their homosexuality while in the military.

It's a contentious issue that Hastings has long supported, and now with the introduction of a bill by Sen. Joe Lieberman, independent from Connecticut, and tacit support from both Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a debate largely divided down party lines has taken center stage.

While Democrats now openly support the measure, up until recently, only a handful of congressional members would propose legislation addressing the issue. One of those was Hastings.

In 2005, he cosponsored legislation to repeal the policy. And last July, he introduced an amendment that would prohibit funding to investigate or discharge individuals accused of being

gay. The amendment was quickly withdrawn, which Hastings attributed to pressure from "congressional colleagues and from the White House."

A Florida native, Hastings has served in Congress since 1993, when he became Florida's first African-American member since Reconstruction. Earlier he worked as a lawyer and a federal judge, until he was removed from office for bribery and perjury.

Personal experiences, not constituent concerns, keep Hastings pushing for the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell." He attributes his interest to the intolerance he faced growing up as an African-American, saying that he fights for the rights of gays in the military with the same fervor that he would fight to desegregate schools.

"My constituents haven't said a single solitary word, no one has said anything to me at all about my position on gays in the military," he said.

Hastings expressed frustration with some of his colleagues, saying certain members of Congress are not totally honest on the matter of gay rights.

"There are people who have been in this institution that are gay and are not out, and they vote on matters that are antigay," he said.

Hastings said that he would not "out" those people but that he disliked hypocrisy, and knew they were "living a life of hell" because they could not be themselves. "Just like people in the military," he said.

Along with his personal connection, Hastings believes repealing "don't ask, don't tell" is in the interest of national security.

"If you tell me we need Farsi and Arabic speakers ... tell me why it is that we would put these people out of the military," he said.

The Defense Department recently proposed delaying action on the policy until a one-year review can be completed. For this longtime champion of tolerance, it's another stalling tactic.

"I don't know what they expect to achieve a year from now or two years from now that could not be achieved today," Hastings said.

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